Old B.C. Journalists Were Masters of

By CECIL CLARK

Unorthodox Mayhem

WHEN DID CORSETS and well water go out of fashion in Victoria?

Where was the biggest mine explosion in B.C.?

Answers to these and like questions you dig out of old B.C. newspapers. In your digging, first thing you know, your eyes are wandering to other items and unconsciously you're sopping up the atmosphere of a bygone era. Which is natural, and interesting; and proves that the history of the province is written in its daily newspapers —papers that have ranged from the dignified "British Colonist" to Col. Lowery's boisterous "Claim," from the "Queek," written and illustrated by hand by Anglican Bishop Ridley on the Skeena in the '80s, to "Transition," written and illustrated today by the inmates of the B.C. Penitentiary.

In between, of course, there have been such things as the "Klondyke Liar," published by Jack Lawson in Vancouver in 1898.

Goldwyn Smith remarked once that from the number of newspapers that have lived and died in B.C., "the province is a journalistic cemetery." Could be. But at one time or another each represented the hopes, fears and dreams of an interesting array of printshop pioneers, men who struggled with ink, type and bill collectors.

Up to 1908 the box score of B.C.'s defunct publications was about 50. Most sprang to life in successive booms; once, according to the record, eight papers catered to a population of barely 1,000. We've had big papers, little papers, papers for gentlemen and one issue printed on wrapping paper. Some were given away, and one sold for a dollar a copy. The men who wrote the bygone news hobnobbed with the strangest collection of humanity ever assembled in one corner of the globe. They came from the ends of the earth: prizefighters, poets and politicians rubbing shoulders with miners and madams, in between a fair sprinkling of cutthroats, booze fighters and boomers.

From these contacts the daily history was written; written by men like author and historian Bruce McKelvie of Cobble Hill, who started at the age of nine feeding paper into a flatbed press on Texada Island; or John Houston, who started "Truth" in the boom mountain town of Donald, and always spelled Mr. with a small "m" in case the miners thought he was high-hat. People like Bob Lowery whose "Claim" had "no free list, but is sent free to persons over a hundred." It was $1 a year, "and sent," as its editor put it, "to any part of the world; but lack of facilities prevents it being sent to Mars, hell or other out-of-the-way places."

Most early-day papers were, as I say, built on dreams; the dream that some mountain mining camp would one day be a city; some piece of waterfront, a port. But the mines petered out or the railroad "went thataway."

VICTORIA had its share of these dreams. Starting with the Gazette, we've had the New Westminster Times, the Telegraph, the Express, the News, the Standard, not to speak of The Week (remember Blakemore?) and the Province. The latter was published here before it moved to Vancouver. We also had the Chronicle, which merged with the province's oldest paper, The Colonist.

It's interesting to note that the first publisher of the Victoria Times was a 15-year-old boy called Sargison, whose idea antedated the present publication by two years. Even now at that The Times was two years old before Vancouver's first newspaper, the "Weekly Herald & North Pacific News," got off the press.

Into the columns of the pioneer papers went all the things that busy researchers check on today. Like the motion pictures shown here in 1897. Typed the Edison Magniscope, the operator ground the projector's crank by hand to show on the screen such things as "After the Storm," which was a succession of waves breaking on the shore; or "The Hurdle Race," horses jumping over hurdles ("every horse distinct") and "The fast Mail," described as an "excellent view of a moving train." "The Great Fire" was a barn burning down. You learn all this from a paper.

If you want to move ahead with motion pictures, let's find out what happened in the 8th episode of "The Perils of Pauline," starring Pearl White. Pauline apparently had been captured by Sioux Indians, and to test whether she's a goddess they tie her up and put her in a trench, with the ingenious idea of rolling a boulder over her. There's no time for Harry to get her out of the trench, and to jump in himself means sure death.

"Harry has been resourceful in the past," the paper tells us, "but this seems almost too much. He finally . . ." What did Harry do? Well, if you had to find out you went to the Kamloops Opera House on the night of May 16, 1915. By this way the man who had something to do with this interesting copy is right here in town: Harry Hodges. He was editor of the Sentinel at the time.

Feature of early-day reporting that catches the eye and mind is the brevity and style of the country correspondent. Here's how a rural stringer reported to the New Westminster British Columbian a magazine explosion at Yale on Aug. 1, 1883:

"Four hundred boxes of powder blew up. Mr. Redgrave, superintendent of the works, was on the roof at the time and was blown a considerable distance up, but suffered very little injury. There were no lives lost but a horse had its head blown off."

Of course, this would be typed "a blast" in modern newspaper parlance, as well as "a miraculous escape from death." Then it was just "a considerable distance up" and in the Columbian's layout they merely moved Hostetter's Blood Bitters to the next column, and slotted the Yale story at the bottom of page 3 with the provocative head "From our Yale Correspondent."

There's considerable charm, too, in the uninhibited view they took of neighbors. Take the early-day Colonist story about the return of Colonial Secretary Young and his family from Portland: "It is melancholy to have to tell you that he lost one of his children at Portland from diphtheria, the curse of that dirty and unhealthy spot."

Lowery was his own cartoonist, and in this drawing expressed his strange character: contempt for money, scattered on the floor, faith in firearms, hanging on his wall, and impatience with "pilgrims," by which he means church folk, and tenderfeet, which, like a delinquent subscriber, he would throw to his dog.

COLONIST EDITOR Amor de Cosmos once noted the departure from the city of a rival editor thus: "He has gone to New Westminster, we are told. The man is an utter scoundrel and the police would be well advised to keep an eye on him."

Interior papers, of course, used scissors and paste with abandon, scooping up stray items from coast papers lucky enough to have wire service. In '65 the editor of the Columbian got a little peeved when the Sentinel's editor at Barkerville persisted in omitting the usual credit for his news.

Apologizing, the Sentinel editor said, "We take great pleasure in acknowledging the enterprise of the proprietor of the Columbian in publishing at vast expense . . ." So far so good. Then he wound up: "We know that the British Columbian finds its way into every house between New Westminster and the Cariboo and does this notwithstanding its principles are far from congenial to nine-tenths of those who read it."

When there was talk, in 1884, of B.C. annexing what is now Alberta, the Kamloops paper went to town in support of the idea. Said the Calgary Herald editor: "If we ever land in B.C. the first thing we'll do is kick the Sentinel man." To which the Sentinel editor replied, "Alright, brother scribe, but if you're no better kicker than you are a writer your intention will be a failure."

Seventy-five years ago the sawmill settlement on the heavily-timbered shores of Burrard Inlet, like Seattle, counted for little in the northwest scheme. There was no regular steamboat service, no newspaper, no railway, no city. Just two little mill settlements, Granville and Hastings, separated by a muddy bush trail. In fact, so little interest, that in '84 at an evening auction of Coal Harbor waterfront lots (in the Colonist building on Government Street) bidding was so dispirited that the second night's auction was called off. The prices? Between $100 and $200 a lot. However, if there was no newspaper on Burrard Inlet there was a correspondent and he filed this item on Sept. 12, 1883, about the com-

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